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# Sacred Women of Africa and the African Diaspora: A Womanist Vision of Black Women's Bodies and the African Sacred Feminine

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Contemporary U.S. society is full of stereotypical images that marginalize and degrade Black women's bodies (Bogle, 1994; Collins, 2000; Gilkes, 2001). However, many pre-colonial, spiritually based cultures of North and West Africa (Badejo, 1996; Gleason, 1987; Jell-Bahlsen, 2008) developed indigenous concepts of the African Sacred Feminine, a term I use to describe African representations of the feminine aspects of nature and divinity, as well as the innate, human and spiritual powers embodied by women. Using artistic depictions from ancient Algeria, dynastic Egypt, and West and Central Africa, this essay explores several iconographic traits of the African Sacred Feminine: nudity or semi-nudity combined with symbolic adornment, scarification patterns, highly coiffured hair and elaborate headdresses, human-animal hybrids, and elemental or cosmic associations. Notably absent in transpersonal literature, these historic tropes, found in the work of modern Black women artists AfraShe Asungi and Earthlyn Manuel, provide alternative counter-stereotypic visions of Black women's bodies.

**Keywords:** *African Sacred Feminine; AfraShe Asungi; Earthlyn Manuel*

Many Black women in the United States still find themselves oppressed by Eurocentric beauty standards, patriarchal gender norms, and racist depictions of Black female sexuality that identify Black women as "sexual deviants" (Collins, 2013, p. 29). A number of Black authors (e.g., Bogle, 1994; Collins, 2000, 2013; A. Davis, 1981; hooks, 1981; Jewell, 1993; Roberts, 2010) have discussed the degrading stereotypes of Black women as self-effacing mummies, lascivious breeders, and tragic mulattoes that emerged in the aftermath of the transatlantic slave trade, and the subsequent Jim Crow era. These negative social constructs have been re-packaged for the 20th and 21st centuries and are used to police, critique, and marginalize Black women today (Collins, 2006; A. Davis, 1981; hooks, 1981; Jewell, 1993; Roberts, 1999).

In contrast to this linking of Black physiognomy with negative, genetically inherited human (or subhuman) traits (Drake, 1991), this essay reviews images of African women developed by a variety of historic African cultures, several of which existed millennia before the transatlantic slave trade and the development of modern racism. Many early African cultures did not separate the

sacred and secular dimensions of life, but created images that depicted Black women as sacred embodiments of social, spiritual, and cultural power.

I see these diverse images of sacred women, elemental female powers, deified ancestors, or Black goddesses, as collective manifestations of the *African Sacred Feminine*, a term I use to characterize diverse African elaborations of female divinity, and embodied female social and cultural power. While this term may be seen by some as reifying gender binaries, I use it in recognition of the fact that *femininity* and *masculinity* are culturally constructed terms. While individuals of diverse sexual orientations and diverse genders exist in Africa as they do everywhere else in the world, the cultural and artistic celebration of the African Sacred Feminine was a part of many pre-colonial African societies. While Western viewers may see these images as archetypes, representing "the feminine aspect... of divinity and psyche" (Bolen, 1990, p. xiii), for many scholars of African spirituality, these dynamic images *simultaneously* represent elemental powers and natural forces (Badejo, 1996; Gleason, 1987), innate female power (Washington, 2005), and historic ancestors, and actual women (Teish, 1985; Washington, 2005).

In their African cultures of origin, female deities and elemental powers were venerated by women and men alike, and in select examples from Nigeria (Badejo, 1996; Jell-Bahlsen, 2008), these deities and powers are venerated by people of all genders today. Although many spiritually based North, Central, and West African cultures were patriarchal, they still acknowledged the existence of male and female deities, and affirmed the spiritual power, political authority, and social leadership of women (Badejo, 1996; Oyewumi, 2003; Rushing, 1996; Schwarz-Bart 2001).

As a Black American *womanist*—a term Pulitzer Prize winning author Alice Walker (1983) created to define “a Black feminist or feminist of color” (p. xi)—especially one who values the body, spirit, and agency of Black women (Walker, 1983; Razak, 2006), I believe that in spite of imposed sexist gender norms, African American culture affirms Black women’s leadership in liberation struggles that serve the entire people, male and female (A. Walker, 1983). I would further argue that the activism, leadership, and spiritual power of iconic African-American women such as Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, and Ida B. Wells (A. Davis, 1983), who all embody the womanist ideal, are rooted in West African cultural concepts that viewed spiritual power, economic prowess, physical strength and political authority as characteristics shared by all genders—and therefore characteristic of both the masculine and feminine realms (Amadiume, 1987; Badejo, 1996; Gilkes, 2001; Stoeltje, 1997; Washington, 2005).

Many of the new spiritual traditions celebrated by African Americans in the United States—whether emanating from the Black Church or from African-derived traditions that draw from Yoruba, Fon, Igbo, Dahomean, or Khemetic sources—not only provided African Americans of all sexes with potential sites of resistance to racist oppression (Goboldte, 1995; Hucks, 2008; H. Walker, 2011), but reflected West African concepts of women’s power. Among the Ibo and Yoruba, women held power not only as individuals (Amadiume, 1987, Washington, 2005), but as members of female collectives which were part of dual-gendered systems of social, spiritual, and political power (Amadiume, 1987; Badejo, 1996; Rushing, 1996; Sudarkasa, 1996). These collectives enabled women to challenge, critique, punish, and make war against individual men, as well as masculine collectives and colonial bureaucracies (Van Allen, 1972).

Some West African concepts of women’s leadership survived the transatlantic slave trade and are reflected in African-American Christian practices which allowed Black women to serve as church and community mothers, respected elders and preachers (Gilkes, 2001). However, like many practitioners of women’s spirituality, I believe that to be fully effective, liberatory spiritual paradigms which serve women must be grounded in a spiritual vision of the body itself—as well as in an open, affirming and inclusive view of women’s sexualities (A. Walker, 1983, 1997). As I will discuss later, the Christianity of the slavemasters—and of the early Black Church—did not always support the priestly empowerment of women or validate their bodies and sexualities (Gilkes, 2001; Williams, 1993).

While scholarly debate abounds regarding the status of women in traditional African cultures, most sources agree that many West, Central, and North African societies did not demonize sexuality or the female body, choosing instead to valorize the awesome *spiritual* powers of fertility, healing, and creativity embodied in women and their sexuality (Badejo, 1996; Jell-Bahlsen, 2011; Washington, 2005). This paper reviews indigenous African female imagery including Neolithic cave paintings found in the Tassili plateau in present day Algeria, dated as early as 8,000 BCE (Austen, 1990; Lhote, 1959), more recent Egyptian tomb paintings circa 1300 BCE (Austen, 1990), and sculpture from West and Central Africa, circa 1400 BCE to 1900 CE (Austen, 1990). In contrast to many Christian images of the Sacred Feminine (Austen, 1990; Baring & Cashford, 1993), depictions of the African Sacred Feminine are often nude, or semi-nude (Thompson, 1974). Some images have elaborately coiffed hair, representing the well-ordered paths of destiny (Badejo, 1996); others exhibit scarification patterns that designate social status or African healing traditions (Yarbrough, 1992). In ancient Egypt, jewelry, bracelets, and other adornments often represent cultural symbols of power and authority (Lesko, 1999; Tyldesley, 2006). Art from Neolithic times, dynastic Egypt, and pre-colonial West Africa presents images of Black women’s bodies at a time when Blackness was not perceived as a negative quality, but was an affirmation of our inherent beauty, sacredness, and power.

Contemporary artists and spiritual healers are drawing on this ancient iconography, as reflected in work by two female artists reviewed here: AfraShe Asungi (1982, 1991) and Earthlyn Manuel (1999). I believe

that historical images of the African Sacred Feminine offer a healing template to the wounds of racial misogyny that African-American women still experience in regard to their bodies, their sexualities, and their social and spiritual roles. The modern art that I discuss grows out of the tradition of African-American resistance, bringing the socially despised and dishonored bodies of Black women front and center in the recognition of a God who is Black and female, embodied and divine. In exploring the social matrices and worldviews out of which these images arise, I find evidence that supports modern Black women's leadership, spiritual and moral authority, creativity, sexuality, and competence.

For scholars, activists and spiritual practitioners who identify as Black feminists or womanists, Black women's liberation includes the personal as well as the political. *Womanism*, as Walker (A., 1983) defined it, called for Black women's empowerment and autonomy in the spiritual, sexual, political, and artistic realms. Calling on Black women to "Love [themselves]. *Regardless*" (A. Walker, 1983, p. xii), *womanism* asserted that the body, psyche, spiritualities and sexualities of Black women were as important as the material conditions under which they struggled (A. Walker 1983; A. Walker, 1997). My focus on African images of Black women's bodies is a womanist endeavor that seeks to reverse the self-hatred and shame that many Black women still feel about their bodies. The images I review serve as reminder that the bodies of Black women were once seen as embodiments of spiritual power, earthly beauty and elemental majesty—and I believe that in a racist and patriarchal society, the reclamation of the beauty of Black women is a political, spiritual, and transformative act.

### **Black Women and Their Bodies: Contemporary and Historic Issues**

The recent films of Davis (2005) and Duke and Berry (2011) which explore the importance of Eurocentric beauty norms among contemporary Black women demonstrate that Western society has *still* failed to promote positive norms in relation to Black women's bodies. As Black anthropologist and African Studies professor Marimba Ani (1994) noted in *Yurugu*, negative Eurocentric stereotypes about Black women's bodies have been exported throughout the world:

A continual pressure exerts itself upon the psyche of a "nonwhite" person living within the ubiquitous

confines of the West to "remold," "refashion," "paint," "refine," herself in conformity with this European aesthetical image of what a human being should be. The pressures begin at birth and outlive the person, often breaking her spirit long before her physical demise. This aspect of the European aesthetic is a deadly weapon at the service of the need to dominate and destroy. So deep is the wound it inflicts that in Senegal, West Africa, women, some of the most beautiful in the world, burn and disfigure their rich smooth, melanic, ebony skin with lye in the attempt to make it white. (p. 221)

Numerous psychological studies (Bond & Cash, 1992; Hughes & Hertel, 1990; Hunter, 1998; M. S. Thompson & Keith, 2001), books (Craig, 2002; Jackson-Lowman, 2013), and films (K. Davis, 2005; Duke & Berry, 2011) have documented the negative effects that Eurocentric beauty standards have on the self esteem of Black women today. Davis (1981), White (1985), and Collins (2000) have all described the racialized sexism of the plantation system and the Jim Crow and Civil Rights eras which gave birth to some of the negative stereotypes which still oppress Black women. Under the plantation system Black women worked in the fields and endured the same punishments that Black men received. However, they were also subject to the sexual predations of Euro-American men and forced cohabitation with Black men, should their owner desire it. As a class, Black women were even denied the most basic rights of motherhood: the protection and nurturance of their young. Meanwhile middle class, Eurocentric tropes of womanhood which originated in the Victorian era and continued through the end of the 19th century—modesty, chastity, dependence, and delicacy—were categorically denied to Black women, as Sojourner Truth attested in her famous response to a man speaking out against woman suffrage:

Dat man ober dar say dat woman needs to be lifted ober ditches and to have de best place every whar. Nobody eber helped me into carriages, or ober mud puddles, or gives me any best place and ar'n't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have plowed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me—and ar'n't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man (when I could get it), and bear the lash as well—and ar'n't I a woman? I have borne thirteen chilern and seen em mos' all sold

off into slavery, and when I cried out with a mother's grief, none but Jesus heard—and ar'n't I a woman? (Gilbert, 1878/1968, as quoted in White, 1985, p. 14)

According to a variety of Black authors (e.g., Collins, 2000; A. Davis, 1981; hooks, 1981), the unequal and oppressive circumstances of plantation era slavery engendered the negative stereotypes of U.S. Black women as asexual mummies, hypersexualized Jezebels, domineering Sapphires, and tragic mulattoes. These stereotypes were created to dehumanize enslaved African-Americans, and to justify their mistreatment. For example, Roberts (2010) stated, writing about the stereotype of the promiscuous Jezebel,

The ideological construct of the lascivious Jezebel legitimized white men's sexual abuse of black women; for if black women were inherently promiscuous, they could not be violated...Jezebel defined black women in contradiction to the prevailing image of the True Woman, who was virtuous, pure and white. Black women's sexual impropriety was contrasted with white women's sexual purity. (p. 45)

Roberts (2010) believed that, "two of the most prominent images of enslaved women are erotic opposites—the oversexed Jezebel and the asexual mammy" (p. 45). Like other scholars (Cole & Guy-Sheftall, 2003; Collins, 2000; Jewell, 1993; Lee, 1996), Roberts (2010) asserted that these negative stereotypes of Black womanhood have persisted into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries where they continue to influence modern Black men and women.

Recent studies have measured Black women's resiliency in the face of Eurocentric beauty norms (Pearson-Trammel, 2010), or identified more nuanced responses in relation to skin color preferences (Coard, Breland, & Raskin, 2001; Jordan & Hernandez-Reif, 2009). Nonetheless, Black women's problematized relationships to their bodies continue in the preference given to small-framed, lighter skinned, straight haired, Eurocentric-featured African-American women in popular media (Bogle, 1994; Pearson-Trammel, 2010), the use of images of African-American people to illustrate social and cultural deviance in medical and political discourse (Roberts, 1999), the stereotyping of dark skin as "bad" or "ugly" (Pearson-Trammell, 2010), and the lack of images of Black women in mainstream religious iconography.

### **The Search for Liberatory Black Spiritualities**

It is perhaps obvious to seek affirming images of Black women within the spiritual traditions of Black people; however, many Black spiritual traditions in the United States were shaped by the dominant Euro-American culture which was patriarchal, racist, and classist. In spite of this, African-American spiritual traditions often provided refuge from the negative beliefs and stereotypes generated to de-humanize Africans and justify their enslavement (Du Bois, 1903/2003; Leary, 2005). Spiritual traditions developed by Black people—both enslaved and free—during slavery and the Jim Crow era, provided refuge from the forces of racialized oppression (Goboldte, 1995; Lee, 1996; Pellet, 1991). These new traditions supported individual and community healing, and helped enslaved Africans and their descendants create hybridized *African-American* identities, and institutions like the Black Church (Du Bois, 1903/2003).

However, the Black Church has had an ambivalent relationship with Black women and their bodies. While Black women's spiritualities are not limited to one particular religious creed or doctrine (Holmes, 2004), and may or may not be connected to a religious institution (Buckner, 1995; Noll, 1991), the Black Church has been a significant resource for the Black community as a whole (Du Bois, 1903/2003), Glaude, 2003; Higginbotham, 2003) and for women in particular. On the one hand, it has supported and continues to support the creation of culturally appropriate (Goboldte, 1995) female identities, sanctioning Black women's roles as missionaries, and church and community organizers (Gilkes, 2001). While many mainstream Baptist and Methodist churches denied women the pulpit, the Sanctified church recognized Black women's right to pastor, preach, and found new churches (Gilkes, 2001).

On the other hand, the Black Church has shared many of Western culture's sexist and patriarchal values (Higginbotham, 2003). It privileged maleness over femaleness, and was ambivalent at best (and condemning at worst) toward female sexuality and the female body. As an institution, the church often embodied sexist or homophobic culture (Douglas, 2003) or mirrored the sociocultural structures of Black internalized oppression, such as classism or colorism (Gilkes, 2001; Roberts, 2010).



In more recent times, the lack of a liberating, spiritual iconography that reflects the bodies of Black people has been a source of conflict for a growing number of African-American women and men (Sojourner, 1995; A. Walker, 1997). Although the Black Church may call on God as Mother and Father, its most significant images of God are male. Many practitioners of women's spirituality (e.g., Christ, 1997; Goboldte, 1995; Noble, 1991; Teish, 1985) have suggested that women need *embodied, female* images of Spirit (God) in order to claim first-class spiritual citizenship. Black lawyer, vocalist, and ecofeminist, Bagby (1999), in her memoir *Divine Daughters*, explored the repercussions of the lack of a divine female presence in the Black Christianity of her youth, while Euro-American feminist theologian, Christ's (1979) essay, "Why Women Need the Goddess," suggested that

Religious symbol systems focused around exclusively male images of divinity create the impression that female power can never be fully legitimate or wholly beneficent... A woman ... can never have the experience that is freely available to every man and boy in her culture, of having her full sexual identity affirmed as being in the image and likeness of God. (p. 275)

In a similar fashion, I believe that *some* African-American women need a Black or African Goddess if they are to find wholeness and meaning at the heart of the world(s) in which they live. As self-described witch and Yoruba studies scholar Sabrina Sojourner (1995) writes in "From the House of Yemaya: the Goddess Heritage of Black Women":

It was only as late as my parents' generation that countless Black women and men began leaving the church, no longer believing in the salvation offered by a white god and savior. Now many women of my own generation are discovering that God is not only not white, She has never even been considered male until ... relatively recently! (p. 272)

The search for a Black or Afrocentric liberatory spirituality has led many African Americans to take refuge in African or African-derived traditions (Hucks, 2008). In many of these traditions, Black women often find a particular resonance with the female divinities and elemental powers drawn from (re-created) Yoruba, Vodun, or Kemetetic practices (Adeye, 2011; Karade, 2011; Shanel, 2011; Teish 2011; H. Walker, 2011).

## Womanist Vision of Black Women's Bodies

### Women's Cultural Roles in Selected West Africa Societies

Since many contemporary African Americans have chosen to work with African-derived traditions from West Africa (Cuthrell-Curry, 2011; Hucks, 2008; Teish, 1985) it is important to examine the roles of women in a variety of West African societies. While enslaved Africans were drawn from many indigenous nations in West and Central Africa, including the Yoruba, Igbo, Fon, Bakongo, and Mandike nations (Raboteau, 1987/2004), in this paper I focus on Yoruba and Igbo societies, due to the early dispersion of Yoruba religious practice among several of these nations (Yai, 2008), and the subsequent dispersion of Yoruba religious traditions in the Americas (Murphy & Sanford, 2001; Olupona, 2008).

According to a variety of Black cultural scholars (e.g., Badejo 1996; Sudarkasa, 1996; Washington, 2005), our enslaved African ancestors came primarily from non-Christian, West African cultures that embraced and celebrated the eroticism (Boone, 1986; Rushing, 1996), spiritual power, physical strength, creative abilities, and spiritual authority of women. In many of these societies, the power and authority of male roles in society were *balanced* by the power and authority of female roles—the moral, physical, and spiritual power (s) of women *complemented* the moral, physical, and spiritual power(s) of men, including in many instances the power(s) of the king (Badejo, 1996; Rushing, 1996; Stoeltje, 1997).

In "On Becoming a Feminist: Learning From Africa," Black Studies professor Andrea Rushing (1996) asserted that these African ancestors were "senior sisters, revered mothers, farmers, textile workers, merchants, healers and religious leaders" (p. 124). In many of the embodied cultures from which enslaved Africans were taken, dance and music not only supported personal and community health and spirituality (Ajayi, 1996), but provided processes in which women exercised formal and informal social power (Badejo, 1996; Van Allen, 1972). While female sexuality was regulated and controlled (Boone, 1986) in these cultures, it was not seen as demonic; rather, sexuality and fertility were seen primarily as *spiritual* qualities (Teish, 1985). Large female bodies were not marginalized for they were seen as the embodiment of fertility and female power (Badejo, 1996; Boone, 1986). As an example, Yoruba

*oriki* (praise songs to the *orishas* or Yoruba deities) celebrated the full figured bodies of Black goddesses like Oshun, who is described as “the powerful and huge woman who cannot be captured” (Olajubu, 2003, as quoted in Alarcon, 2008, p. 81), or Oya, “the massive woman up in the sky” (Gleason, 1987, p. 9).

Many pre-colonial West African societies that practiced traditional African religions were patrilocal—with a woman’s place of residence determined by her husband’s residence—and patrilineal—with descent based on the male line. This led many Western scholars to believe that males held all the dominant roles in politics and public life (Stoeltje, 1997; Sudarkasa, 1996). However, in *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*, fieldwork conducted by Igbo anthropologist Amadiume (1987) demonstrated that among the Igbo, women had rights, responsibilities, and powers, as daughters of their patrilineage (e.g., their father’s lineage). These rights did not terminate upon their marriage, but continued throughout their lives. Abiodun (2001) and Badejo (1996) have shown that the spiritual authority of Yoruba women as senior priestesses enabled them to function in complementary relationship with ruling kings or chiefs; and among the Ashante who are matriarchal, Stoeltje, (1997) argued that “queen mothers are female monarchs in a hierarchical social system with a central authority that is lineage based and characterized by gender parallelism” (p. 49).

Although much of what is known about “traditional” non-Christian African societies is based on information gathered by anthropologists during the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Nkulu-NSengha, 2001), many African cultural scholars (Abiodun, 2001; Badejo, 1996; Jell-Bahlsen, 2008; Sudarkasa, 1996) have asserted that women in indigenous West African societies, prior to colonial contact held roles of political, social, and spiritual authority. Writing about the Yoruba and other West African nations, Black anthropologist and former Lincoln University President Niara Sudarkasa (1996) stated, “In pre-colonial times, women were conspicuous in high places. They were queen-mothers; queen-sisters; princesses; chiefs; and holders of other offices in towns and villages; occasional warriors; and in one well-known case, that of the Lovedu, the supreme monarch” (p. 73). Black feminist scholars Johnnetta Cole and Beverly Guy-Sheftall (2003) believed that West African women’s prominence in the economic arena led to an “absence of dependence on males ... related to the fact

that women carried out much of the physical labor, and because they controlled the market-places, they were often economically independent” (p. 106).

Discussing the powers that Igbo women held in the pre- and post-colonial eras, activist–scholar and senior fellow at the Institute for African Development Judith Van Allen (1972) asserted that women held power through working and acting together. She noted in her article, “Sitting on a Man: Colonialism and the Lost Political Institutions of Igbo Women,” which discusses the 1929 Igbo women’s war against the British:

As individuals (Igbo women) participated in village meetings with men. But their real political power was based on the solidarity of women as expressed in their own political institutions—and their “meetings” (*mikiri* or *mitiri*), their market networks, their kinship groups, and their right to use strikes, boycotts and force to effect their decisions. (p. 165)

She discussed women’s use of songs, satires, and dances undertaken at the compound of male offenders to convince them to change their ways, and details successful strikes and boycotts that occurred when men threatened to fine women for taking lovers (Van Allen, 1972). The powerful female roles that Black women held in various West African societies were suppressed in slavery, but they live on both within the psyches of individual African Americans and within the complex web of cultural traditions that we have collectively inherited and transformed (Gilkes, 2001; Lee, 1996; Morrison, 1998; Rushing, 1996; Sudarkasa, 1996).

### **Sacred Women of the Tassili Frescoes**

While pre-colonial West African societies have helped to lay the foundation for African American women’s social roles in the 21st-century United States, documented evidence of the African Sacred Feminine is found millennia before the emergence of West African empires and city-states. Cave art found in the Tassili plateau in present day Algeria, present some of the earliest known images, not only of African art (Lhote, 1959) but of the African Sacred Feminine. Archeologist Henri H. Lhote (1959), leader of the expedition that brought these magnificent images to the attention of the Western world, found thousands of paintings in various sites in Tassili-n-Ajjer in the Sahara Desert. Noting that many of these images were found in fairly inaccessible areas that were too small to have been dwellings, Lhote suggested that these sites were used for “religious

initiation and for secret mysterious cults” (p. 84). According to Jungian mythologist Joseph Campbell (1983), Lhote divided the images into six overlapping time periods. The Bubalus or ancient era, circa 7,000 BCE to 4,500 BCE; the Round-Heads era, circa 6,000 BCE; The Bovidian or Pastoral era, circa 4,000 to 1,800 BCE; the Post-Bovidian era, which overlapped the 18th Egyptian Dynasty, 1,570–1,432 BCE; the Chariot and Equestrian periods, circa 1,200 BCE; and the Camel period, circa 100 CE (Campbell, 1983; Lhote 1959).

The two periods most relevant to this essay are the Bovidian period, and the post-Bovidian period. Cave paintings from the Bovidian era depicted a time when the Sahara was green and verdant, populated by hippopotamuses, gazelles, and other wildlife. The paintings were developed by pastoral peoples who had domesticated sheep or cattle and begun the practice of agriculture (Campbell, 1983; Lhote, 1959). The post-Bovidian period was strongly marked by Egyptian influence (Lhote, 1959).

Images from the Bovidian and post-Bovidian period are highly naturalistic, featuring women, men, and wild and domesticated animals in natural groups and poses. Depictions of Black women include highly stylized images of horned goddesses, rainmaking priestesses, or sacred female ancestors, dancing, hunting, or conversing together (Lhote, 1959, p. 81). Their semi-nude bodies are artfully adorned, characterized by softly rounded bellies and erect or pendulous breasts. In some cases their prominent buttocks are in marked contrast to their slender waists and long necks (Campbell, 1983, p. 86). In the post-Bovidian period, some of the figures wear black or white masks, fringe skirts and armbands, waist bands, and other ornaments (Lhote, 1959, p. 136).

One of the most widely reproduced figures from the Tassili caves is called “The White Lady” (Lhote, 1959, p. 81) or “the Horned goddess” (Campbell, 1983, p. 84). In this image (Figure 1), a horned woman is shown running across a field. Dots that may be scarification marks adorn her shoulders, legs, pendulous breasts, and torso; fringed armbands are attached to her arms; and anklets and leg bands are placed at the joints of her knees and ankles. A short fringed skirt covers her upper thighs, while a rainbow between her legs arches over the torso of another woman. White dots that may be rain or grains fall between her horns, suggesting “a priestess of some agricultural religion or the picture of a goddess...who foreshadows—or is derived from—

the goddess Isis, to whom in Egypt, was attributed the discovery of agriculture” (Lhote, 1959, p. 221).



**Figure 1.** The Horned Goddess. Photograph from Hallie Austen’s (1990) book, *Heart of the Goddess* (p. 139). Reprinted with permission.

I suggest that this image of the horned Goddess contains iconography that will be repeated in other depictions of the African Sacred Feminine. The figure’s pendulous breasts—indicating her ability to nurse children—along with her semi-nude and deliberately adorned body, open-handed gestures, and cap or headdress occur in other images of the African Sacred Feminine. Her (animal) horns connect her to Nature and the pastoral herds that mark the Bovidian period; her size (in relation to the other beings in the picture) may indicate her status; and the field of grain that lies between her horns indicates her sacred or priestly nature. Art historian and African American History professor, Rosalind R. Jeffries (1992) linked the image of the Horned Goddess to other African images of the Great Mother in her article, “The Image of Woman in African Cave Art:

She wears long horns on her head surmounted by a pot shaped hat that has short barely visible fringes ... . Much more elaborate fringes, tassels and knots are fashionable highlights in court attire of the 25<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, Nubia ... Her hat ... resembles the upside



down pot shaped hats of the Mende Bundu helmet masks ... worn by women of the powerful Sande society. (p. 106)

The short fringed skirt (resembling raffia) worn by the Horned Goddess and other female figures, along with her anklets, arm bands, scarification patterns, and possible head wrap are all seen in modern West African ceremonial dance forms (Huet, 1978, plates 18, 69; Beckwith & Fisher, 1999b, pp. 188, 204–205).

The Tassili paintings show notable differences in racial types. In *Black Folks Here and There, Volume 1*, Black sociologist and African and African American Studies professor St. Claire Drake (1991) concluded, “Rock paintings in the Sahara and pre-dynastic artifacts in Egyptian tombs reveal a keen awareness of differences in physical types, but what meanings were attached to them—esthetic, erotic, mystical or status allocation—we have no way of knowing” (p. 128). Lhote (1959), on the other hand, had very clear ideas about the different racial characteristics found in these paintings. Discussing the “White Lady,” he stated,

The rounded belly, the convex, curved buttocks, the breasts like goat’s udders all bear witness to a relationship with the old [sic] negroid stock whose characteristic features we had already encountered... Still it seemed to me ... that I could make out another artistic influence to which, for the moment, I did not dare put a name.” (pp. 80–81)

In this statement, I believe that Lhote is indicating his reluctance to accept as truly African artifacts produced by African peoples. One of the difficulties that African-American women have in finding images of the African Sacred Feminine lies in the tendency of early Euro-American scholars and archeologists to deny its existence, even when it is in plain sight. Campbell (1983), for example, attempted to separate the Tassili images from their Black origins: Noting the “exceptional” (p. 84) nature of the Bovidian images, he stated that they are “neither Negroid nor European, (but) of an east African Hamitic stock with long straight hair. Henri Lhote sees their descendants in the Fulani of today” (p. 84). In contrast to this assertion, photographs of Fulani women taken by contemporary photographers and ethnographers Beckwith and Fisher (1999a) show the Fulani to be dark-skinned people with full lips and broad noses (pp. 178–179, 187).

The rounded bellies, curved buttocks, and

pendulous breasts that Lhote (1959) wished to name as “African” or “Negroid” are normal human female characteristics—and their depiction in Tassili, especially in representations of women who are presented as priestesses or goddesses, suggests that these traits were not despised. Indeed, before modern medical techniques these features were common among older women of many races—and they are seen in Neolithic cave paintings and rock art found throughout Europe, the Mediterranean, Australia, Africa, and the Pacific Islands (Austen, 1990; Gimbutas, 1996). The unfortunate tendency to lighten, whiten, deny, or destroy indigenous African images of the Sacred Feminine is not limited to discussions of the Tassili frescoes. A similar marginalization and erasure of African bodies is also found in many scholarly discussions of artistic images of women in ancient Egyptian culture.

### **Sacred Women of Egypt**

Although contemporary Western re-creations often depict ancient Egyptians with light or white skin and Eurocentric or Afro-Asian features, as Black historian, and anthropologist Dr. Cheikh Anta Diop has argued, the ancient Egyptians were of a physical type called “Black” or “Negro” in the United States—a type that includes a wide range of skin colors and facial features (Drake, 1991). According to the noted Africanist and Afrocentric scholar Ivan Van Sertima (1994), while “there was probably no great civilization in the world, be it African, European or Asian that was entirely pure and homogenous” (p. 2), there were many “major native [African] dynasties *before* the late invasions of the Persian, Greek and Arab foreigners” (p. 1). During the millennia in which Egyptian civilization flourished (circa 3,100–1,069 BCE) many different ethnic groups lived in Egypt and intermarried. According to Rashidi (1994),

From the beginning of the first Kemetic Dynasty and though the greater part of her Dynastic Period, African peoples with dark complexions, full lips, broad noses, and tightly-curved hair were overwhelmingly dominant in both the general population and the royal families. (p. 81)

The tendency to ignore signs of African (e.g., “Negroid”) physiognomy unless they can be used to disparage or marginalize African bodies is still a problematic issue in contemporary Eurocentric scholarship, transpersonal literature not excluded. Not only is there a lack of positive images of the Sacred Feminine *with African features* in Eurocentric scholarship, there is a

tendency to explain dark skin as an artistic convention. For example, while Egyptologist Joyce Tyldesley's (2006) review of dynastic queens presents a wide range of physical types, including many with pronounced African features and dark or Black skin, in some cases she attributed this coloring as *symbolizing* a connection to the fertility of the land (p. 90). In a similar fashion, in his photograph of a sculptured head of the Nubian queen Tiye, who is depicted as a very dark skinned Black woman, Hawass (2000) noted only that the sculpture is made of ebony.

While there are significant differences between the rock art of the Tassili caves and the tomb and temple paintings of the imperial dynasties of ancient Egypt, the goddesses and divine queens of Egypt are obvious representatives of the African Divine Feminine. Since Egyptian influence is present in Tassili (Campbell, 1983; Lhote, 1959), it is not surprising to find some continuities between iconography of the Sacred Feminine in the Bovidian and post-Bovidian periods in Tassili and iconography of the Sacred Feminine in Egypt, especially in art from 2,650 –1,069 BCE during the Old Kingdom, First Intermediate Period, Middle Kingdom, Second Intermediate Period, and New Kingdom periods (Tyldesley, 2006), as I hope to show.

Adult women of authority in Egypt were rarely depicted nude, although the most common garment was a semi-transparent piece of linen that traced the contours of the body (Hawass, 2000), sometimes outlining the vulva. In some styles, the breasts were exposed to the level of the nipple. (While rarely shown this way in Western recreations, this exposure was readily apparent in my study of Egyptian tomb and temple art during my visits there.) Softly rounded bellies, full thighs, and slightly protuberant buttocks mirror some of the images presented in Tassili, and according to Egyptian archeologist, Hawass (2000) "heavy thighs [and a] narrow waist" were signs of beauty (p. 76).

The jewelry that is often seen in paintings and statues of Egyptian goddesses and queens was often linked to material and spiritual power (Hawass, 2000). The Royal vulture crown was associated with the vulture goddess Nekhbet, who symbolized Upper Egypt, and the rearing cobra crown or Uraeus was associated with Wadjet, who ruled over Lower Egypt or the Nile delta (Lesko, 1999). These crowns also linked the wearers to the spiritual and cosmic powers embodied by Egyptian animal/human deities. Jewelry in the form of protective amulets, crowns, bracelets, breast-plates, headdresses, and rods of power signified the wearer's wealth, status, spiritual authority,

and protective attributes (Hawass, 2000). While it was customary for wealthy women to shave their heads and wear wigs, the wigs depicted in many paintings of ancient Egyptians resemble the braids and dreadlocks worn by contemporary Diasporan women today. I believe that these semi-nude images of sacred queens and goddesses who are depicted in a variety of skin colors, whose physiognomy represent the diversity of features that are called Black in the United States, offer an inspiring and refreshing counterpoint to the racist depictions of Black women that still exist today.

An image of the goddess Isis leading Queen Nofretari to the underworld is presented in Women's Spirituality scholar Hallie Austen's (1990) *Heart of the Goddess* (p. 49), shown in Figure 2. The original image is



**Figure 2.** Isis leading Queen Nofretari. Photograph from Hallie Austen's (1990) book, *Heart of the Goddess*, p. 49. Reprinted with permission.

painted on the wall of Nofretari's tomb in the Valley of the Queens at Abu Simbel. In this image, Isis wears the solar disk and horns of Hathor, the cow goddess, while Queen Nofretari is crowned with the sacred vulture and follows the goddess. Their elaborate headdresses are both signs of power and emblematic of their connection to spiritual and cosmic energies. The two figures wear semi-translucent garments that outline the female shapes of their bodies, including in Isis's case, a protruding nipple. I feel that these images are representations of the African Sacred Feminine, and while their adornment is more elaborate than what is found in Tassili, the tropes of semi-nudity, symbolic adornment, spiritual power, and connection to nature are all present.

While many Christian images of the Sacred Feminine emphasize the nurturing aspects of the Mother (Baring, & Cashford, 1993), some Egyptian images combine depictions of power and death with the functions of compassion and protection. For example, Selket, the scorpion Goddess depicted in *The Heart of the Goddess* (Austen, 1990, p. 89), protects birthing and nursing mothers. Her statue was found in King Tut's tomb, placed in the role of a guardian. She is shown as a beautiful woman who balances an image of a scorpion on her head (p. 89). While she is an example of the African Sacred Feminine, Selket's obvious connection to the scorpion demonstrates that the African concept of the sacred feminine includes both life giving and death dealing powers. While she seems small, delicate and beautiful, she is clearly a formidable protector and adversary.

### **Sacred Women of Historic West and Central Africa**

While much of Egyptian art depicts slender, idealized forms of the deities and ruling elites of Egypt, the artistic conventions of modern Yoruba ritual sculpture (1,500 CE–1,900 CE) rarely emphasized natural features. However they often emphasized the sexual parts of the body, which can be problematic for Western viewers. As Jungian psychologist Jean Bolen (1990) wrote, "Most of us have been brought up to be ashamed of our bodies and our genitals, and the dominant culture values only youthful, slender (and usually Caucasian) figures as beautiful" (p. xiv). However, the highly spiritual art of the Yoruba emphasized the "essential" or spiritual qualities of the individuals portrayed. As African art historian Robert Farris Thompson (1984) wrote in *Flash of the Spirit*:

Ritual contact with divinity underscores the religious aspirations of the Yoruba ... . The radiance of the eyes, the magnification of the gaze, reflects *ashe*, the brightness of the spirit (9) ... . A thing or work of art that has *ashe* transcends ordinary questions about its makeup. (p. 7)

While depictions of mothers carrying children may imply female subordination in the West, among the Yoruba and many other West African societies, the term, *mother* was a title of power, linking women to the awesome mother spiritual energies of "fertility, power and cosmic harmony" (Badejo, 1996, p. 80). Used within the family or lineage, "mother" was a term of respect; used outside of it (as in the Yoruba term *iyalode* or "mother of the outside"), the term was an acknowledgement of women's absolute right and fitness to hold political and social roles of authority beyond the domestic sphere. As Women's Spirituality scholar Hallie Austen (1990) wrote in *The Heart of the Goddess*:

In Africa ... the birthplace of the human race, artistic images of mother and child are widespread. Unlike many depictions of Euro-Western Madonnas, however, the emphasis is on the mother, rather than the child. Traditional African societies consider children divine gifts and value women as the mothers of culture, as well as for their equally miraculous ability to conceive, give birth and feed their physical children. (p. 22)

Among the many fine representations of traditional West African carvings in Austen's (1990) text, the Gwandusu image of the Bamana people of Mali (Figure 3) represents the power of woman to nurture and protect. Carved from wood between the 14th and 15th centuries CE, this being is seated on a "throne." Her stature and headdress might indicate she is "a chieftain or the founder of a lineage or clan, or the Primordial Mother described in many African legends" (p. 22). In her lap is a small child, clinging to her with arm outstretched upon her long torso, underneath a shielding breast that seems to act as a protection for the child. Her gaze seems to be surveying all, and yet keeping a watchful eye on her creation. Each of the symbols found in this image is an iconographic representation of power associated with female lineage.





**Figure 3.** Gwandusu. Photograph from Hallie Austen's (1990) book, *Heart of the Goddess*, p. 23. Reprinted with permission.

Another aspect of woman's power as creator is indicated in Austen's (1990) collection of images of "Open Goddesses." These figures that she called the "universal symbol of the feminine" (p. 119) "display their sacred vulvas" (p. 118) symbolic of the "gateway to life" (p. 118). While Austen's photographs of these figures include carvings from India, Australia, South America, Europe, Oceania, and Africa, one of the African figures she depicted was found carved on a wooden door in Gabon. Labeled by Austen as "Gabon Open Legged Figure: 19th century CE" (p. 121), this woman has large

protuberant eyes that may imply spirit possession or surrender (Thompson, 1984, p. 9), an elaborate coiffure, and scarification marks at her breasts and torso.

The importance of hair and hairdressing as a mark of social status and spiritual power (Rushing, 1996) is reflected in the many African figures depicted with elaborate hair and hair adornment. In a culture where "the head is the site of one's spirit/soul/destiny" (p. 129), Rushing (1996) noted:

Neatly arranged hair is much more than a matter of personal choice for the Yoruba, to whom tousled hair is a sign of chaos, rather than free-spirit sexiness. It [orderly hair] is the special province of the powerful, elegant female *orisa* deity Osun—one of whose *oriki* praise names is "owner of the beaded comb." (p. 130)

The beaded comb of Osun is used to part the pathways of destiny (Badejo, 1996), and in the Yoruba worldview, "hair-do's are human manifestations of the harmony and order they discern in the natural world and strive for in social relationships" (Rushing, 1996, p. 130).

While there are significant differences between images of the African Sacred Feminine in Tassili rock art, Egyptian tomb paintings, and West African sculpture, this brief overview demonstrates that there are also similarities. Images in Robert F. Thompson's (1974) text, *African Art in Motion*, are drawn from a variety of cultures in West and Central Africa during the late pre-colonial and early colonial eras (1,500–1,900 CE). The female figures are often depicted nude or semi-nude. Their torsos carry scarification patterns, and their erect or pendulous breasts, which allude to generosity, are prominently displayed. Elaborately coiffed hair, headdresses, or crowns adorn their heads. Some of the figures wear actual beads or are sculpted wearing amulets of power. Many of the figures are accompanied by children or hold children on their backs. These West African images of Sacred Feminine are meant to convey the strength and rootedness that are part of West African elaborations of femininity—qualities that African American women embody today.

### Contemporary Depictions of the Sacred African Feminine

While earlier images of the African Sacred Feminine provide a rich diversity of Black women's body types, in this section I explore the work



of two contemporary Black female artists and spiritual practitioners—AfraShe Asungi (1982) and Earthlyn Manuel (1999)—whose visionary work celebrates the African Sacred Feminine. Their artistic styles utilize different liberatory strategies. AfraShe emphasizes Black women's shared spiritual and cultural past in the lost matriarchies of ancient Africa (Asungi, 1991). Her images show Black women as divine creators, whose idealized forms reflect their spiritual power, linking us to art, culture, beauty, and civilization. Earthlyn's (1999) work embraces aspects of Black women's bodies that have been defined as negative by the dominant society. She emphasizes the naturalness of African American women's bodies, and the inner strength and gifts of their enslaved ancestors. Like traditional African artists who depicted goddesses and spirit beings as animal-human hybrids, the imagery of AfraShe and Earthlyn includes other-worldly beings who combine plant, animal, or human traits.

#### **AfraShe Asungi.**

AfraShe Asungi (1991) has been celebrating Black women for over forty years. The founder of MAMAROOTs: AJAMA-JEBITM, which is an "AfraGoddess sistahood dedicated to Afracentric spirituality and cultural awareness" (p. 42), she situates many of her figures in ancient *Kamaat* (Egypt) which she translates to mean the "Sacred Sun-kissed lands where the Black faced Mama of Genuine Righteous Truth dwells" (p. 44). Her art depicts Black women as mythic goddesses, historic queens, and spiritual warriors. She wrote:

I needed to see strong, self-contained and focused Black wimmin, so I reached into our tales, myths, goddesses and other spiritual realities and thus created this series as my visual song, in praise of the wonders of the feminine spirits I found there. (Asungi, 1982, text on note card depicting her art)

In her pastel painting, *Dunham's Life Song* (Asungi, 1982), radiant colors and symbols adorn a Black woman of power and authority unfolding her double set of wings, one on her back and one across her eyes like a ritual mask. Her strong wing feathers, colored persimmon orange, corn blue, and soft magenta, are in striking contrast to a black, starred night sky. Asungi stated:

Katherine Dunham is a great choreographer, anthropologist and priestess of the Haitian religion. She is

represented by the snake, also symbol for Damballah, the Haitian god. But she has also been represented by the unicorn, symbol of the mysterious positive life forces and ultimate power of the universe. Other symbols are her golden arm bands—which give her the blessings of Ochun, the river Goddess, the navel guard which is the symbol of Isis, and the moon Goddess, Yemaya. (Asungi, 1982, text on note card depicting her art)

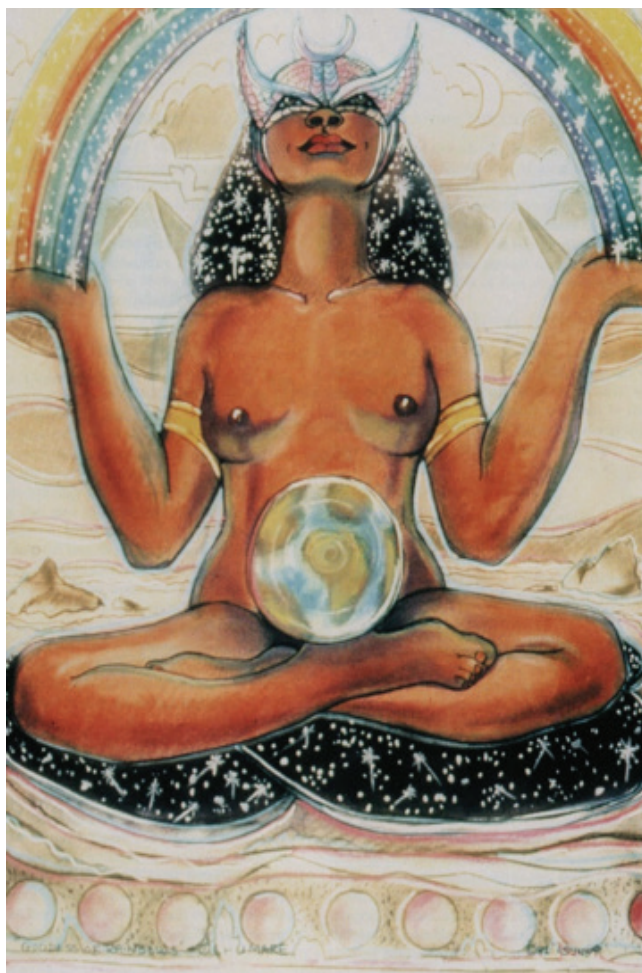


**Figure 4.** *Dunham's Life Song*, pastel painting by AfraShe Asungi in 1981. Reprinted with permission.

In her depiction of Ochumare, the Rainbow Goddess (Figure 5), a nude Black woman wearing a winged mask sits in lotus position on a pad created from the starry night of the cosmic galaxy. The spinning Earth with the continent of Africa foremost sits at her navel; she wears golden armbands, and balances the rainbow between her outstretched arms.

Two pyramids rise behind her. A crescent moon sits at her left shoulder, and her hair is an extension of the night sky. In *The Heart of the Goddess* (Austen, 1990), Asungi described this work:

Ochumare as the rainbow moves the sea waters between the heavens and the earth. I see her as the cosmic channel amongst the goddesses of the universe and the earth. Here she rests in the beauty of self awareness....she sits upon the universal waters and the cosmic lily pads symbolizing her ever presence. She is nude, symbolizing her purity and ultimate pride of self. Her mask is a sign of strength and mystery. The Earth in her lap is spinning from the absolute energy that she provides from her navel which is a source of cosmic power. (p. 150)



**Figure 5.** Ochumare, the rainbow goddess. Pastel painting by AfraShe Asungi, reprinted with permission from Hallie Austen's (1990) book, *Heart of the Goddess* (p. 151).

## Womanist Vision of Black Women's Bodies

Asungi's powerful images of idealized dark-skinned female bodies offer a dramatic contrast to negative racially charged stereotypes of Black women. When I initially saw her art in the 1980s, I remember thinking, "These bodies look like mine!" Their rounded feminine forms, dark radiance, bare breasts and ease of posture suggested a time when black women's bodies, sexualities, and authority were honored. Her woman-centered images did not rely on male authority figures for validation but were complete within themselves. They were clearly spiritual women whose dress and adornment suggested ritual power and wholeness, while their bodies and skin tones reflected the diverse lineages of the Diaspora. Asungi has elaborated a woman-centered spirituality that is African based and incorporates re-imagined African-centered spiritualities, and Africana *sheroes*.

### Earthlyn Manuel.

Rather than presenting idealized body types, in her *Black Angel Cards*, Earthlyn Manuel (1999) has produced artistic images derived from Black women's actual experience, depicting women who are quilters, sister-friends, midwives, seers, grandmothers, and dreamers. Manuel honors and reclaims the soul-sustaining activities which nurtured generations of Black people, sacralizing the ordinary and extraordinary acts of love, courage, perseverance and devotion that enabled Black people to survive and thrive. Rejecting racist ideas asserting that Black women's physical bodies are inherently ugly or repugnant, she emphasizes the full lips, wildly explosive hair, and irregular contours of real Black women's bodies. Manuel's (1999) *Black Angel Cards* illustrate Black women's history in the modern Diaspora. She explained:

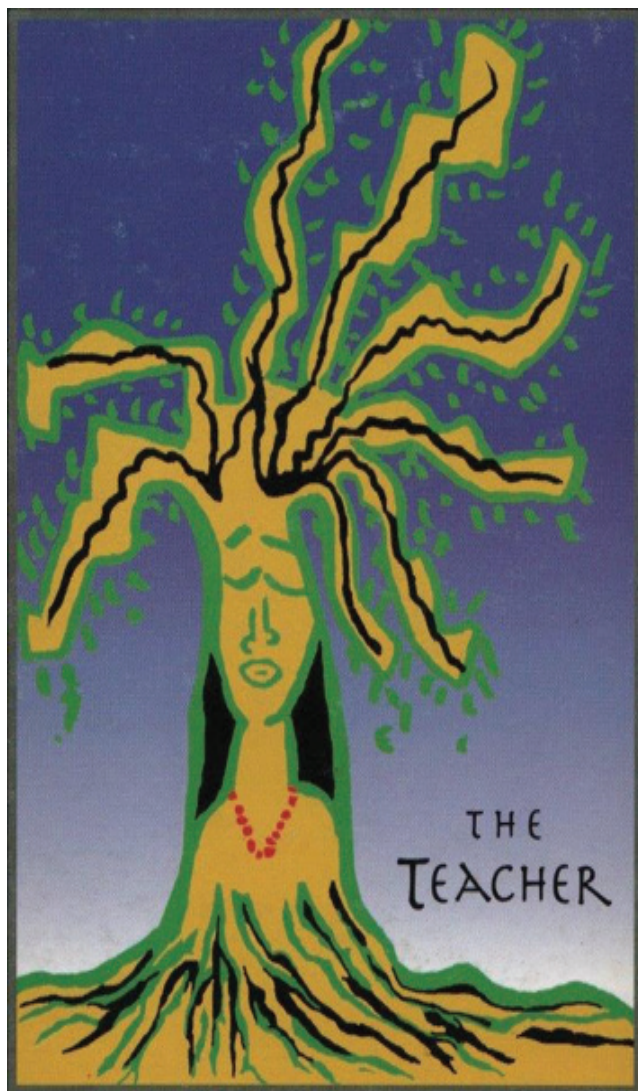
The Black Angel Cards have been divined as a gift to black women who are seeking to rejuvenate their lives. They are for black women who want to change their ordinary lives and their perception of life, but have felt stifled by an inability to transform the limitations of blackness and womanness. (pp. 6-7)

Her work reflects African traditions that emphasize the pre-eminence of a woman's inner character versus the perishable beauty of her outer form (Thompson, 1984).

In her image *The Teacher* (Figure 6), Manuel (1999, p. 171) has created a hybridized tree-woman wearing a red necklace. Her roots reach deep into the ground, while her upwardly flowing locks, encased



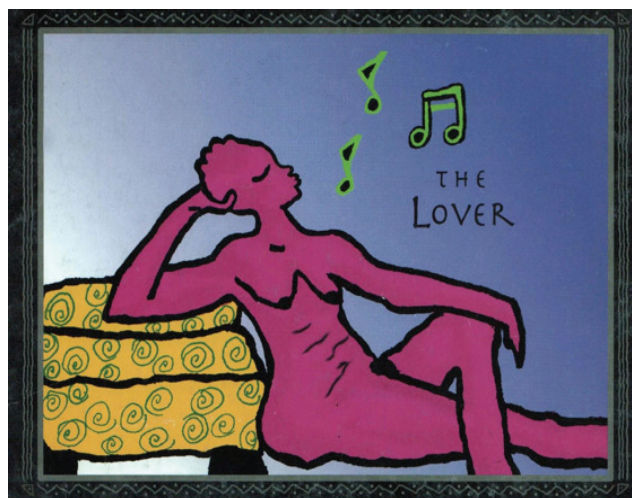
in leaves and branches, erupt into a dawn or twilight sky. Her broad nose and wide mouth are indisputably African, and her closed eyes and serene expression evoke the remoteness of West African masks. Echoing Egyptian images of Hathor in a sycamore tree, *The Teacher* is a tree of life to the people, offering her wisdom, and experience as food.



**Figure 6.** *The Teacher*, by Earthlyn Manuel (1999), from her book *Black Angel Cards* (p. 171). Reprinted with permission.

Another image titled *The Lover* (Manuel, 1999, p. 115) portrays an ordinary-looking Black woman, with short nappy hair, wide thighs, and a wrinkled belly (Figure 7). Her erotic power lies in her self-love and inner worth, indicated here by her relaxed stance and joyful singing, rather than by idealized outer beauty. Manuel's images of Black women validate the ordinary

Black woman's body—and the African features that racism despises.



**Figure 7.** *The Lover*, by Earthlyn Manuel (1999). From her book, *Black Angel Cards* (p. 115). Reprinted with permission.

#### Contemporary Issues: Resistance and Spirituality

Unfortunately, Black women today are still oppressed by negative stereotypes that demean and degrade their bodies. Even First Lady Michelle Obama is not exempt from these stereotypes: a Bing web search conducted on October 5, 2014 using the phrase “Michelle Obama ugly” revealed three types of images of Ms. Obama. Some caricatured her African features so that her lower lip and jaw extended 3-4 inches from her face (e.g. Cabral, 2011). Others reflected stereotypes of her as an angry Aunt Jemima (e.g., Hudnall & Lash, 2011). The third type presented her as a monkey (e.g., Varg, 2009). In my opinion, the most pernicious image was the actual photo of Ms. Obama as a young, dark-skinned high school student in 1981 (HuffPost Style, 2013)—the first picture to come up under the Bing web search: “Michelle Obama ugly.”

Some Black women succumb to the messages encoded in the negative images that surround us. As Black sociologist, womanist, and African American Studies professor Cheryl T. Gilkes (2001) noted, writing on the subject of Black women's self esteem:

Many current social problems are often tied to low self-esteem or self-hatred. Self-hatred or damage and brokenness to our inner visions make it impossible for us to make and share effective liberating visions

for our community and our world. Self-hatred may be one of the deepest sources of conflict and turmoil within the African American community. This may be especially true concerning women and their bodies. (p. 181)

Today, many Black women are choosing to reject, transform, and ultimately transcend the stereotypes and prejudices that question our inherent humanity, intelligence, and beauty. My review of historical images of the African Sacred Feminine has convinced me that negative stereotypes of Black women's bodies are a relatively recent phenomenon. I believe the recovery of African images of the Sacred Feminine are a vital part of our efforts to generate diverse, healing images that serve a variety of Black women's needs, especially in regards to our bodies and our sexualities. The contemporary artists that I have reviewed have created images of Black female divinity and empowerment that integrate spirituality, sexuality, power and embodiment. They reflect womanist injunctions to love the body, the self and all of creation. The images I review encourage us to change our perspectives and adopt new ways of perceiving the world and our bodies. They ask Black women to remember that we were once seen as goddesses, spirits and sacred women—and that whether we choose to connect spiritually or historically with the African Sacred Feminine, it can serve as a source of empowerment and pride.

Since all of humanity is said to descend from a First Mother in Africa, these images of the Sacred African Feminine are important to everyone. As people in a deeply diverse and multicultural world, we all need to know that our foremothers were powerful spiritual women, and that their cultures loved and embraced them. The images of the Sacred African Feminine that I have presented are only a small fraction of what has been elaborated in diverse African cultures over many eras of historic time. There is a need for further womanist investigation to see if the symbols and tropes found in West Africa are common to other areas of Africa—and there is a need to have womanist scholarship included in the broader area of transpersonal studies so that the needs, experiences and issues of African-American and African Diasporan peoples are addressed within the field. Most importantly, it is time to reject racist master narratives that deny or erase the positive cultural elaborations that have arisen in Africa that proclaim Black peoples' inherent agency, intelligence, spirituality and beauty.

## Womanist Vision of Black Women's Bodies

As children—and descendants—of diverse African cultures, our skin is black, brown, ivory; caramel, cinnamon, and honey. As womenpeople, our hips are strong like trees growing in the earth, round like the curves of the hills, straight like the edges of the horizon. The broadness of our noses declares our strength of character; our hair is a wilderness holding sunlight, rain, and the spiral patterns of the universe. Our ancestors call to us across millennia—as we take our rightful place in the dance of life.

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